

The Growth of Achilles

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From the first pages of Homer's *The Iliad*, Achilles is portrayed as vengeful, proud, and petty. As the book progresses, the image of Achilles as a spiteful child is sharpened dramatically. Towards the end of the epic; however, Achilles begins to exhibit qualities that are considered heroic even in today's society. Once his loyal and trusted friend Patroclus dies, Achilles undergoes a drastic change in character. When he confronts the true horror of death, Achilles puts aside his immature ways to fulfill his duty to his friend, his compatriots, and his conscience. In this way, the progression of Achilles as a character is an analogy for the transition from youth to maturity.

The first book of *The Iliad*, appropriately titled the "Rage of Achilles," sets the scene for the remainder of the epic. Agamemnon seizes Achilles' prize, the beautiful Briseis, to sooth his own wounded pride. Even though Achilles is correct to suggest that Agamemnon return Chryseis, the swift runner's brash manner leaves Agamemnon feeling slighted. In return, Achilles vows that he will not fight in the Trojan War any longer. Once Briseis is seized, Achilles goes to the beach to cry to his mother. This is reminiscent of how a small child would act when denied something he wants. It seems that Homer is trying to compare Achilles' actions in the early books to that of a child.

Achilles implores his mother to go to Zeus and ask the god to crush the Greeks until they give Achilles the honors he deserves. When Thetis goes to Zeus, she reveals the prophecy of her

son's doom: he would have a short, glorious life or a long, lusterless one. Even this early in the epic, it is difficult to believe Achilles would ever settle for a long life without glory.

Somewhat later in the epic; however, this is precisely what Achilles intends to do. When Agamemnon sends an embassy to entreat the swift runner, Achilles tells them:

...two fates bear me on to the day of death.

If I hold out here and lay siege to Troy,

My journey home is gone, but my glory never dies.

If I voyage back to the fatherland I love,

My pride, my glory dies...

True, but the life that's left me will be long,

The stroke of death will not come on me quickly. (9.499-505)

Achilles then proceeds to urge the rest of the Greeks to sail home and abandon the war in Troy. Although this seems to imply that Achilles has given up his youthful brashness, he also mercilessly insults Agamemnon in the same book. His refusal to let go of his anger and his concern for his own future indicate a more adolescent or young adult viewpoint, rather than his previous childishness.

The three ambassadors, Odysseus, Telamonian Ajax, and Phoenix, all appeal to Achilles to release his anger, implying that they look at him as a youth raging at worldly injustices. When Odysseus tells Achilles "Fail us now? What grief it will be to you / through all the years to come. No remedy, / no way to cure the damage once it's done" (9.301-3), and when he quotes Peleus' parting words to Achilles, he assumes a fatherly role towards Achilles. He warns him of the grief to come with the voice of experience. Phoenix also uses the fatherly approach, though more directly, by telling Achilles "great godlike Achilles - I made you my son, I tried, / so someday

you might fight disaster off my back" (9.599-600). Achilles rejects both of these appeals somewhat harshly, as one would expect an adolescent to reject the advice of his parents.

Ajax, however, treats Achilles more like an equal than a youngster. He tells Achilles, "Past all other men, all other Achaean comrades, / we long to be your closest, dearest friends" (9.784-5). Achilles responds most favorably to this approach, but still refuses by explaining that his rage at Agamemnon still consumes him. This willingness to listen to his peers rather than his elders is another trait of adolescence Achilles exhibits in this portion of the epic.

Achilles first shows signs of feeling a sense of duty towards the Greeks several books later when Patroclus beseeches Achilles. Achilles still refuses to enter combat, but the reason he gives is "Still, by god, I said I would not relax my anger, / not till the cries and carnage reached my own ships" (16.71-2). This statement shows that Achilles desires to take part in the war, but he is unwilling to admit that he was wrong to refuse in the first place. In his stead, Achilles sends Patroclus, clad in the swift runner's armor and leading the Myrmidons. Achilles is beginning to show a mature responsibility towards his companions, but still retains his spiteful dedication to his anger.

Soon afterwards, when Patroclus dies, Achilles is finally swayed to put aside his anger. Though a desire for vengeance is a large part of Achilles' decision, he also exhibits disgust at his own anger when he says ". . . All those burning desires/ Olympian Zeus has brought to pass for me - / but what joy to me now? My dear comrade's dead . . ." (18.92-4). In this statement, Achilles finally realizes the folly of his rage and decides to seek vengeance for the death of his comrade. This is the first time Achilles acts like an adult, leaving behind his youthful rage.

The final evolution of Achilles' character occurs in the final book of the epic. Homer reports that Achilles is commanded by the gods to release Hector's body to Priam when the king

comes to retrieve it. One can interpret this as Achilles having a change of heart, realizing that the anger he feels towards Hector is as pointless an anger as that he felt towards Agamemnon. Thus, when Priam comes to retrieve Hector, Achilles treats him with respect. Achilles further agrees to give Priam enough time to bury Hector properly. This is the most compassionate Achilles has been throughout the epic. His actions show that he has finally seen to the heart of his fury and found it pointless and destructive. He is ready to fulfill his duty to the Greeks, yet is willing to treat his enemies with respect and courtesy because they are humans as well.

In conclusion, the progression of Achilles' character in *The Iliad* can easily be viewed as an analogy for the progression of a child to an adult. From the spiteful rage in the beginning to the compassionate respect in the end of the epic, Achilles' development mirrors that of a stereotypical human from childhood to maturity. The concepts that seem important to him in the beginning, his honor and glory, slowly become supplanted by more reasonable and mature ideals of duty, respect and compassion.

Russell Selva is a physics major. Dr. Joan Faust was his English professor.

Dr. Faust's Comments: *With his clear explanation, illustrative quotes, and logical organization, Selva easily proves his thesis, recapped and affirmed very well in the final paragraph.*